**Dialectic *Norma*: A Multidisciplinary Approach to Bellini’s Opera**

**Introduction**

*Norma*, first produced in 1831, has long been the subject of research in opera studies, with scholars exploring its literary themes and musical structure, as well as its place in Bellini’s work and in the realm of *bel canto* in general. However, two significant and, to a certain extent, interconnected aspects of this masterpiece appear to have been overlooked in scholarly research or, at the very least, to have not received adequate attention. One of these aspects is the complexity of *Norma*’s literary sources stemming from, in part, to their diverse cultural background **and generic affiliation.** Another is the dialectic concept of this opera.[[1]](#endnote-1) This paper seeks to examine these topics and elucidate their possible interconnection by using a multidisciplinary approach that draws on history, literature, musicology, classical studies, philology, gender studies, psychology, and performance studies. The affinities between *Norma* and Greek tragedy, a topic which, although frequently mentioned in passing in the research literature, has not been analyzed in depth, will also be explored.

While most readers are likely familiar with the opera’s plot, a brief synopsis is still useful, particularly as it provides a basis for later discussion in the paper and an opportunity for clarifying the historical background. The action takes place about two thousand years ago, in Roman Gaul − i.e., Gaul under Roman occupation.[[2]](#endnote-2) Norma is the great priestess and prophetess of the Druids, a privileged sect among the Celtic native tribes led by her father, Oroveso. Despite her vows of chastity and the obligation of strict loyalty to her community, Norma has been leading a double life: having fallen in love with the Roman proconsul (governor) of Gaul, Pollione, she mothered his two children, born in secret out of this sacrilegious liaison. Under these circumstances, she constantly tries to prevent the Druids from revolting against their Roman oppressors. However, Pollione has since fallen in love with a younger Druid priestess, Adalgisa, whom he plans to marry in Rome, now that his term of office has unexpectedly come to an end. The discovery of Pollione’s betrayal so enrages Norma that she contemplates the murder of their children, but **maternal feelings overcome even her fury**. Planning to commit suicide, she asks her rival to accept Pollione’s proposal and to take care of her children in Rome. Adalgisa rejects **this** entreaty, and generously **offers her help in securing Pollione’s return**. Following the failure of Adalgisa’s attempt, Norma, consumed with rage, calls **on her people** to revolt against the Romans. While the Druids search for a human sacrifice **before embarking on their insurrection**,[[3]](#endnote-3) Pollione is caught in the sacred forest as he tries to abduct Adalgisa. Under the pretext of needing to be left alone with the prisoner in order to interrogate him, Norma offers him an ultimatum-deal: she will save his life if he vows to give up Adalgisa forever. Furious at his refusal, **she** threatens to exact revenge by denouncing Adalgisa, but then, surprisingly, decides to reveal her own sacrilege. Moved by Norma’smagnanimity, Pollione falls in love with her again and willingly accompanies her to the pyre. Before their death, Norma successfully implores her father, Oroveso, to save the children’s lives. There is a sharp contrast between the apparently melodramatic character of the plot and the tragic essence of this opera − one of the many dichotomies examined **in this study**.

Traditionally, *Norma* has been performed in its ancient setting, but in recent years, under the influence of what is called in German *Regieoper* (“direction opera” or “director’s opera”), there have been attempts to transfer the action to modern times. This aspect of performance studies is discussed in the last section of this paper.

1. ***Norma*’s Sources**

*Norma’*s première took place in December 1831 at La Scala in Milan, when Bellini was thirty-years-old (four years before his death). The librettist was Felice Romani, who worked in close collaboration with Bellini, and who had been inspired by Alexandre Soumet’s poetical drama *Norma, ou L’infanticide*. This had premiered in Paris nine months earlier, which may help explain the speed of the opera’s creation process, although the plot and the concept of Soumet’s drama were significantly changed in the opera.

The main motif in Soumet’s play, as indicated by the title, was infanticide. Medea’s act of madness − murdering her own children to revenge her abandonment by her lover − had aroused an intense interest in early-modern cultural circles in France and Italy. Already in 1635, Pierre Corneille wrote a tragedy, *Médée*, inspired to a great extent by ancient authors, especially Euripides, **Apollonius Rhodius’ *Argonautica*** and Seneca. In 1693 Charpentier composed an opera about Medea and, about a century later (in 1797), Medea also figured as the eponymous heroine in a highly successful opera composed by Cherubini. Michael Ewans claims that Cherubini and his librettist, Hoffman, were the first to restore to Medea the tragic dimension that characterized Euripides’ drama, after a long period during which French theater had turned the subject into a melodrama of love, intrigue and witchcraft.[[4]](#endnote-4) In 1813, Felice Romani, *Norma*’s librettist, wrote a libretto for the opera *Medea in Corinth* composed by Simone Mayr.[[5]](#endnote-5)

Despite the close associations between the stories of Medea and Norma **as mothers abandoned by the father of their children**, the motivation behind Norma’s infanticidal thoughts is more complex than jealousy, fury and vengefulness – the motivations of Medea in all her versions. Norma appears to believe that her children’s lives are intolerable in both Gaul and in Rome owing to their origin and the circumstances of their birth; **in Gaul they would face torture and in Rome disgrace** (“*Qui supplizio e in Roma obbrobio*” − II.1). Unlike Medea (in mythology and tragedy), or the Norma of Soumet’s play, Bellini’s Norma, for all her rage against her treacherous lover, does not murder her children, but does everything in her power to save their lives. This highly significant **departure from** the classical-pagan tradition of Medea by **the librettist** may be attributable to the concept and sanctity of motherhood in Christian mentality. As this paper seeks to demonstrate, *Norma* **contains a subtext** of Christian values, many of which appear to have been influenced by Chateaubriand, the so-called father of French Romanticism.

Chateaubriand wrote a prose epic which served as a source of inspiration for both Soumet and Romani **(especially the latter).** That epic, *Les Martyres*, published in 1809, revolves around a Druid heroine named Velleda, **a generic appellation of proto-Celtic origin for “prophetess”[[6]](#endnote-6) similar to that of the Delphic Pythia, Apollo’s priestess**. Velleda called for revolt against Roman rule, but eventually fell desperately in love with a Roman commander, for which she paid with her life. In Chateaubriand’s work, the plot takes place in the age of Diocletian, about three hundred years later than the period of *Norma*’s plot, and includes easily discernible Christian values, such as forgiveness and unconditional love, quite representative of the author’s ethos, as is clear on the theoretical-ideological level from his work *The Genius of Christianity* (*Le génie du christianisme*), as well as from the preface to *Les Martyres*.

Two years before the publication of Chateaubriand’s epic, Gaspare Spontini’s opera, *The Vestal* (*La Vestale*), premiered in Paris. Its plot focused on a forbidden love affair between Licinius, a Roman general, and Julia, a Vestal Virgin. (In ancient Rome, the Vestal Virgins were in charge of the rituals associated with Vesta, the goddess of the family). Pollione’s courtship of Adalgisa in *Norma* resembles Licinius’s courtship of Julia in Spontini’s *La* *Vestale.* **Both generals contemplate the abduction of a sacred virgin from the altar, and the lives of both virgins are in jeopardy because** of **a sacrilege that they have not committed.** It appears that the motif of a virgin priestess’ seduction by a Roman general, like the infanticide theme of Medea, also stirred the imagination of Bellini’s contemporaries. In the context of gender studies, this line of analysis has relevance in terms of connecting the seduction theme with social/sexual subjugation and the male-female power imbalance.

In 1820, another opera for which Romani also wrote the libretto, *The Priestess of Irminsul* (*La Sacerdotessa d’Irminsul*) by Giovanni Pacini, premiered in Trieste. The plot differs significantly from that of *Norma.* The action of *The Priestess* takes place in the early Middle Ages (as did much of the contemporary Romantic literature), during the period of Charles the Great (Charlemagne), and focuses on a different love triangle, with two nobles in love with the same woman. While this melodrama has a happy ending, it still reiterates the motif of a priestess’s seduction by an army commander, and its libretto has some similarities with that of *Norma*. It should be stressed that Norma was also the priestess of Irminsul, a god of war.

Romani, who had a classicist’s background, found a particularly significant source of inspiration for the libretto of *Norma* in Latin literature − Virgil’s *Aeneid*, Book IV, where the motif of the breaking of a vow of chastity appears in the Carthaginian queen Dido’s passionate love affair with the Trojan hero Aeneas, **who later abandoned her**.[[7]](#endnote-7) A few lines in Norma’s libretto are strikingly similar to the furious reproach addressed by Dido to her former lover Aeneas and the curse she inflicted on him.[[8]](#endnote-8) The “cruel Trojan,” as Aeneas is referred to by Dido **(*Aeneid*,** IV. 661−662**),** became the “cruel Roman” (“*Crudel Romano*”) in Norma’s depiction of Pollione (II.11) — a metamorphosis which is of special significance given that the Trojan hero Aeneas was considered **their** distinguished ancestor by the Romans. Vindictive fury is a key term in both the *Aeneid* and in *Norma*: *ira/furia* and *furia*/ *furor/furore*, respectively (**the latter** frequently rhymed in Italian with *dolor/e* and *amor/e*), **while** the phrase is often accompanied by threats to pursue the “perfidious traitor” over the sea wherever he goes:

*Te sull’onde e te sui venti*

*seguiranno mie furie ardenti,*

*Mia vendetta e notte e giorno*

*ruggirà d’intorno a te.*

Over the waves, on the wings of the winds

My burning rage will pursue you,

Night and day my wild vendetta

Will keep roaring around you (*Norma*, I.9)

At the lexical level, the first line is obviously inspired by Dido’s imagery − “by waves” (“*per undas”*) and “by winds” (“*ventis*”) − in Virgil’s *Aeneid* IV. 381. So is the librettist’s use of “*furie ardenti*” (burning rage in the plural), which refers back to Dido’s words some lines preceding the above quotation (line 376): “***furiis incensa***,***”* “set on fire by rage,” or “by the furies”**). **The plural form of “fury”** is noteworthy for its ambiguity and rich mythological associations. *Furie* may refer to Dido’s or Norma’s personal rage, but the word may also be considered a reference to the Furies (Erinyes in Greek mythology), female chthonic deities of vengeance and retribution for the commission of crimes against the natural order or for swearing a false oath (perjury). The Furies also happen to be the ironically named *Eumenides* (“The Kindly Ones”) in the last play of Aeschylus’ trilogy *Oresteia*,pursuing Orestes to punish him for the murder of his mother. It is ingenious of Romani, as a classicist, to have this word, with all its religious and cultural connotations in the Greco-Roman civilization, uttered by a Druid priestess rebuking a Roman proconsul **for his** **betrayal**. The image of destructive fire conveyed by the epithet “burning” is dominant throughout the opera, anticipating its tragic finale.[[9]](#endnote-9)

**A central affinity between the tragic figures of Norma and Dido is the tension between their supreme positions of power (exceptional for a woman) and their femininity**. F**or both Dido and Norma, their involvement in a love relationship had tragic** repercussions **on their public roles and on their lives.** The of idea of Norma’s death in flames was possibly inspired by the depiction of Dido contemplating her own funeral pyre before falling on the sword that Aeneas had given her, although in *Norma*, the two protagonists share their fate on the pyre. Carthage’s Phoenician Queen of Virgil’s *Aeneid* seems also to have provided Romani with the inspiration for the flamboyantly royal aura and heroic temper with which he infused the Druid priestess.

**Romani could have found another possible source of inspiration for the abandonment theme in Ovid’s *Epistles of Heroines* (*Epistulae heroidum* xv), a fictional letter addressed by Sappho before committing suicide to her lover Phaon, who had abandoned her for a younger poetess. This apocryphal story, stemming from an attempt to reveal a heterosexual side of the lesbian poetess, was reproduced by Alessandro Verri in a novel he wrote about the adventures of Sappho, poetess of Mytilene, *Le avventure di Saffo, poetessa di Mitilene* (1782). Although highly influential at its time, this novel has since fallen into oblivion. Lamartine, one of the leading poets of French Romanticism, adopted the above version of Sappho's death in a monologue claiming to reproduce her last words, “*Sapho: élegie antique*” (1815).[[10]](#endnote-10)**

In composing *Norma*’s libretto, Romani followed the basic structure of Soumet’s play of the same name but introduced significant changes, the most drastic of which was to delete completely Soumet’s last act; as already noted, Romani’s Norma did not kill her children, as did Medea and Soumet’s Norma. It should be stressed that in addition to Soumet’s play, Romani relied on all of the above sources and succeeded in creating a very special synthesis, a rare blend of erudition and poetic virtuosity, with a flowing, naturally musical rhythm and rhyme. The text contains extremely sophisticated figures of speech, subtle ambiguities, metaphors, rhetorical discourse and numerous cultural allusions (such as that mentioned above with respect to the Furies) expressed with great finesse, most of which are reflected and amplified by Bellini’s *bel canto*, **owing to the meticulous attention that the composer lavished on the words**. **It was this sensitivity to the subtleties of the text in particular which led some cultural critics of Bellini’s age to scribe his style as “*filosofico*.”[[11]](#endnote-11) This characterization should be interpreted in a much broader sense to include the composer’s deep treatment of human emotions and his capacity to integrate, in close cooperation with his librettist, opposing concepts of art (to be discussed in the next section).** **In her personality, Bellini’s *Norma* incarnates various traits of those mythical heroines who contributed to her genesis, especially Medea in all her literary and operatic versions, Virgil’s Dido, Chateaubriand’s Velleda, and Soumet’s Norma (who, in fact, was a Druid Médée). But Bellini’s protagonist was not a mere duplicate of any of her precursors.**

1. ***Norma***’**s Dialectics and Universal Relevance**

*Norma* is a dialectic opera, built on a series of contrasts and dichotomies, which merge into a complex synthesis. One aspect of this binary concept is associated with the two worlds of the heroine: the public sphere and the private sphere; a chief priestess who is committed to a vow of chastity, but is also secretly a paramour and a mother. The world of her inner feelings is replete with dichotomies: love and hate; jealousy and empathy (for her rival); cruelty and generosity; lust for revenge and readiness for forgiveness; hope and despair; fury and reconciliation.

Norma appears as a remarkably powerful and authoritative woman, an “iron lady,” but also a sensitive one, vulnerable in the extreme. Even as a mother, she incarnates a vast spectrum between thoughts of infanticide and the final plea to save her children’s lives (in an aria of lament in which she implores her father to have pity on his innocent grandchildren).[[12]](#endnote-12) **The scene of the contemplated infanticide (II.1) is a psychological drama, imbued with contradictory statements and conflicting emotions,[[13]](#endnote-13) which are emphasized particularly in the somewhat *proto-verismo* recitatives.**  Norma’s near-savage call for war in Act II stands in sharp contrast to her exhortation for peace in Act I in the **two-strophic** “*Casta Diva*” where, **in a somewhat liturgical worship service**, she prays to the chaste goddess of the moon to spread peace on earth as she does in heaven (although the Druid priestess had been far from chaste for quite some time). Norma’s *volte-face* is obviously due to a personal factor. Her inner duality is also expressed in an initial recitative when, as priestess of Irminsul, the Druids’ god of war, she makes strong declarations against “seditious voices, voices of war” (“*sediziose voci, voci di guerra*”) among her own people. The subsequent exhortation for peace in the “*Casta Diva*” *cantabile*, which refers to the public sphere, is followed after a brief interlude (*tempo di mezzo* in operatic terms) by the *cabaletta* “Ah! bello a me ritorna” (“Ah, return to me, O beautiful one”), which relates to the private sphere, her prayer that Pollione will return to her as he was in the first flush of his love. The *cabaletta* reveals that Norma’s reasons for preventing a revolt against the Romans were personally motivated, thus casting a different light on all that she has said so far in public. O**n the abstract level, we are faced with a sharp dichotomy between the “sacred” and the “profane.”[[14]](#endnote-14)** T**his entire scene of Norma’s first appearance on stage (I.4) is marked by frequent shifts in texture and timber, tones and tempi, which perfectly match the situations, the words, the dialectic spirit of the text, and its original rhythm.[[15]](#endnote-15) Both the *cantabile* and the *cabaletta* are typical of Bellini’s *canto declamato* (“declamatory singing”), with its considerable use of ornaments, especially appoggiaturas.**[[16]](#endnote-16)

In the political background, there are dichotomies between conquerors and conquered, between Romans and Druids, although the Romans are represented on stage only by the proconsul Pollione and by Flavio, his centurion and friend. Pollione, who despises the Druids (to whom he refers as “barbarians”) and their religion, paradoxically finds love in the bosom of two Druid priestesses. Later, he suffers his death in flames in the same sacred forest he had threatened to burn in a moment of hubris at the beginning of the opera (I.2;). Before her death, Norma asks her father to protect her children from “barbarians” (II.11). Does this term refer to the Romans or to savages from among her own people (in this case assuming a Roman perspective)?[[17]](#endnote-17) It appears likely that the ambivalence is intentional**, meant to indicate the relativism of alterity**. **In** **postcolonial terms, one may refer to** **the complex relationship between the agents of hegemonic power and the subjugated natives.**

Another example of subtle ambivalence in the libretto is found in the scene in which Norma, **in a *coup de théâtre*,** confesses to being the sacrilegious priestess – “*Son io*” (II.11). Pollione, now a prisoner, asks the Druids not to believe her, to which her succinct riposte is “Norma doesn’t lie” (“Norma *non mente”*). This utterance of “imperial brevity” is ambiguous: taken at face value, it clearly expresses her refusal to lie to save her own life. However, as it is delivered as an immediate rejoinder to Pollione, it can also be interpreted as an antithesis of his infidelity; unlike her lover, she has always been faithful to him. An even further layer of meaning arises from her address to her own community, the Druids. Her firm declaration is marked by an obvious dramatic irony, because she has long been deceiving them by manipulating religious prophesy in order to engage in her illicit liaison with their arch-enemy, the Roman proconsul. In dialectic terms, her ultimate loyalty to Pollione is tantamount to her ultimate betrayal of her people.

At times, there is a striking contrast between the music and the words, which throws the subtle dialectics of the opera into sharp relief. The best example is the scene preceding the above (II.10) when, at her request, Norma is left alone with Pollione, ostensibly to interrogate him. Their duet starts with Norma’s statement: “At last you are in my hands” *(“In mia man’ alfin tu sei”*), which, at face value, expresses vindictive fury and the satisfaction of her approaching retribution. However, the caressing melody of the *cantabile* (**thematically** **introduced by the violins in a string prelude)** reveals profound affection and yearning rather than cruelty and lust for revenge,**[[18]](#endnote-18)** **leaving the singer much room for expression through the body language of gestures, facial expression and movement**.[[19]](#endnote-19)

This is a classic example of a contradiction between text and music in opera: in this case, an ingenious use of melody to give voice to *Norma*’s dialectics. Later in this scene, after **Pollione’s proud rejection of her clemency offer,** Norma becomes increasingly violent, and the initially harmonious and calm melody transforms into an outburst of uncontrolled anger **spanning almost two octaves on a vocal line, with trills and turns —** an explosive cry for sanguinary revenge on Adalgisa and on the Romans.[[20]](#endnote-20) **There is an interlude of sadistic joy (with a galloping *allegro* rhythm of a** *cabaletta***) in Norma’s expression of satisfaction at the sight of Pollione’s torment: “Already in your eyes I feed upon (i.e., I take pleasure in)” [your anguish for her death] (“*Già mi pasco ne' tuoi sguardi*”).** **Symbolically, the sacrificial knife with which she had contemplated killing their children becomes the final object of their dispute, ending in Pollione’s failed attempt to take it from her hands (presumably in order to commit suicide himself).** To perceive the full intensity of this dramatic scene, it should be borne in mind that the man weeping and praying at Norma’s feet (“*al tuo piè son io piangente”*), ready to pay with his life in order to bring her back to her senses and save Adalgisa’s life, is a proconsul, formerly one of the two consuls who were heads of state in the Roman Republic. This is a remarkable inversion of roles from the perspectives of political subjugation and male-female power dynamics. This role reversal is particularly significant in that it takes place within the central confrontation of the work (*agon* in the terminology of Greek tragedy).[[21]](#endnote-21) In the following scene (II.11), the violent sounds of Norma’s rage give way again to melancholic calm and quietness in the melody of her mild reproach to the perplexed Pollione: “What a heart you betrayed, what a heart you lost” (“*Qual cor tradisti, qual cor perdesti”*). **In this threnody,** music and text are again in perfect **consonance, except for the words “*crudel Romano”* which, on the melodic level, express love and compassion rather than anger.**

Norma is a tragic figure in classical, Aristotelian, terms: despite her lofty virtues and **imposing dignity**, she has a human flaw (*hamartia* in the Greek tragic lexicon) that inevitably leads to her bitter and tragic end. Like Iphigenia, Agamemnon's daughter, Norma also ultimately becomes a ritual victim. **Initially a victim was needed for the ritual preparations before war:** in this case, the Druids’ revolt against the Romans. However, unlike Iphigenia, who is an unwitting victim, it is Norma who calls for war and pays with her life, as a sacrificial victim, to expiate for her sins. Therefore, her final death on the pyre can be seen as an altruistic and anomic suicide (in the sociological and psychological paradigm of Émile Durkheim).[[22]](#endnote-22)

In addition to the character of the protagonist and her affinities to Medea, the similarity between *Norma* and Greek tragedy is expressed through a series of structural elements, most of which Aristotle defined as typical of *tragoidia* as an artistic genre (*Poetics*, chs. 8-14): **the gravitas, completeness and magnitude of the action represented on stage**; the tendency to maintain the “classical unities” — the unity of place (Irminsul’s forest and its immediate vicinity), the unity of time (the short duration of the action, less than one day) and the unity of action (the absence of any subplot); the central confrontation (*agon*) between the protagonists representing opposing feelings and attitudes, resulting in the inevitable calamity;and the pivotal point of reversal (*peripeteia*) in the plot, leading to its denouement and the protagonists’ (here, Norma and Pollione) **recognition** (*anagnorisis*) of their fault (“***fatale errore”*** − II.11) and acknowledgment of **full** responsibility. **As Norma expresses it: “Yes, [guilty] beyond all human imagination” (“*Si, oltre ogni umana idea*”), which contains an intrinsic irony of inversion, since her guilt is rooted precisely in the very essence of being “human.”** The inevitability of fate as a superior power dominating human life, a basic theme of Greek tragedy, is invoked by Norma **with stoic restraint** **and resignation** in her address to Pollione before their death. Rather than referring to any specific divinity, the (former) priestess of Irminsul describes the power of destiny in universal terms:

*Un nume, un fato di te più forte*

*Ci vuole uniti in vita e in morte*.

A god, a destiny stronger than you

Wishes us united in life and in death (II.11)

There are additional elements associated with Greek tragedy, such as the religious-ritual dimension; the role of the chorus throughout as an active factor in the drama, representing the whole community, its consciousness and set of values;[[23]](#endnote-23) the role of the *choragus*, i.e., the chorus leader (Oroveso, typically a heroic bass in the opera); the pollution of the sacred sphere by an illicit sexual relationship and the necessity of purification. Pollione’s premonitory dream **(in his *cantabile*)**, motivated by the fear of Norma’s fury, is also a typically tragic ingredient,[[24]](#endnote-24) as is his hubris when threatening **(in the subsequent march, tempo *cabaletta***) to burn Irminsul’s forest and destroy his altar (I.2). Also noteworthy in this respect is Norma’s prophetic warning, as quoted by Pollione’s companion, Flavio, in a somewhat dramatic anticipation typical of the tragic genre: “Death reigns in that forest” (“*In quella selva è morte*” *–* I.2). The feelings of horror and pity that the opera evokes **as well as the** catharsis **which** accompanies them at the finale **are essential elements in Aristotle’s definition of the tragic genre**.[[25]](#endnote-25) In abstract terms, similarly to Greek tragedy, *Norma* reveals an antithesis between the sublime and the bestial in human nature.

The dichotomy between the apparently melodramatic character of the plot and the tragic essence of the opera is also a component of *Norma*’s dualities. The dramatic concept, the structural elements, the psychological world of the protagonists (in particular, that of the eponymous heroine), the poetics of the text **as well as the powerful expressiveness** of the music, have all contributed to the creation of a lyric tragedy. The tragic nature of *Norma* was **already** recognized by the 19th-century German philosopher, Schopenhauer:

Quite apart from its excellent music and considered only according to its motives and to its interior economy, this piece is in general a tragedy of extreme perfection, a true model of the tragic disposition of the motives, of the tragic progress of the action, and of tragic development, together with the effect of these on the frame of mind of the heroes, which surmounts the world. [[26]](#endnote-26)

Norma was composed in the era of the literary struggle between the Romanticists and the Neoclassicists (or Neo-classics). The terms are ambiguous since the latter labelled themselves simply as Classics and are frequently described as such in **studies of literature and art history**.[[27]](#endnote-27) Viewed from this cultural perspective, the opera exhibits a blend of the classical structural traits above (which had become the canon of decorum for the Neo-classical school) and elements typical of Romanticism. The latter include the complexity of the protagonist's emotions; their intensity and extreme spontaneity; **the propensity for expressing these emotions by unrestrained reactions, such as weeping, and by the heavy use of interjections;** a plethora of unpredictable and irrational responses; the readiness to self-sacrifice; the multiplicity of oaths; the suicidal tendencies of the protagonists and the encounter between love and death; the exotic and mysterious diversity of pagan worship; and **the magic of nature, expressed through pastoral hills, moonlight and dark forests**.[[28]](#endnote-28) **On the musical level, Bellini’s *canto declamato*,as well as his melancholic and nostalgic long melodies were typical of the outlook of Romanticism about the appropriate expression of emotion.**[[29]](#endnote-29) It is not surprising that Romantic composers, such as Chopin and Liszt, adapted several motifs of *Norma* for piano variations.[[30]](#endnote-30) Most of the above elements of literary Romanticism are present in Victor Hugo’s play about the noble bandit *Hernani* (1830), which premiered a year before *Norma,* iconoclastically breaking the classical norms and standards, and becoming emblematic of the struggle between Romanticists and their opponents. Bellini started working with Romani on an opera based on this play, but, fearing censorship, they abandoned it within a short time.[[31]](#endnote-31) The only operatic version of the original *Hernani* is Verdi’s *Ernani* (1844), which is perfectly consistent with the Romantic spirit of Hugo’s play.

On the political level, Romanticism is reflected in the national struggle for liberation and the patriotic sentiment of the choral sections. Like the Hebrew slaves’ chorus in Verdi's Nabucco, excerpts from the Druid choirs, especially the enthusiastic cry for war (“Guerra, Guerra!” [II.7]), were adopted as anthems of the struggle for the liberation and unification of Italy, although, paradoxically, these choirs were expressing hatred towards one of the central symbols of the Italian *Risorgimento —* Imperial Rome. It should be noted that even the Druid choir’s savage call for war in “Guerra, Guerra!” ends in a pastoral coda with the final words “a ray of sunshine” (“*un raggio di sol*”), yet another example of the juxtaposition of binary opposites in this work. The above synthesis between elements belonging to the two almost irreconcilable currents of art and systems of thought — Neoclassicism and Romanticism — is central to *Norma*’s dialectics in the Hegelian sense. **An accurate *mis-en-scène* should be able to express this synthesis, as well as other aspects of Norma's dialectics**.

The opera contains themes that spoke to the hearts of Bellini’s contemporaries in the first half of the 19th century and are still relevant today, although in different ways and contexts: the place of a strong and dominant woman in a patriarchal society; **the tension between holding a supreme position of authority and womanliness**; the balance of power between men and women; and hatred towards the imperial rule of conquerors and rebellion against it. Certain motifs of the work have a particular attraction in the modern era. One of them is the clash of civilizations, with one regarding the other as “barbarian.”[[32]](#endnote-32) In this respect, the opera may also evoke associations with renewed outbursts of “tribal” and religious fanaticism that often result in human sacrifices, not only in the metaphorical sense. *Norma* presents us with an emotional, mental, political and religious world that, on the one hand, seems intensely foreign and remote but, on the other hand, also appears familiar to us. It is no surprise, then, that this work has inspired attempts at moving the plot from ancient to modern times in the spirit of *Regieoper*, a topic discussed in the next section.

Another motif of great interest today is the solidarity and empathy between women. Some have tried to find a feminist or proto-feminist element in *Norma* (even a hint of lesbian attraction between the two heroines). Thus, for instance, Patricia Smith, in describing the relationship between Norma and Adalgisa, uses terms such as “romantic friendship,” “female homosociality” and “homoeroticism,” and observes: “There are few instances in opera…of such passionate declamation of feeling between women.”[[33]](#endnote-33) However, the Sapphic theory is based mainly on a few ambiguous lines in the duet between Norma and Adalgisa starting with “Mira, o Norma.” Smith fails to mention an important argument in support of her theory: Norma’s proposal to save Pollione’s life, and never see him again, in exchange for his vow to forgo his liaison with Adalgisa. **Nor does she mention the possibility that owing to the legacy of her abandonment and subsequent suicide, Sappho could also have contributed to the process of Norma’s genesis. Worthy of note with respect to the gender studies perspective is t**hat Bellini’s opera inspired the play *Norma '44* (1986) by the Italian feminist writer Dacia Maraini.[[34]](#endnote-34) The plot of the play parallels that of the opera, which also serves as a musical and cultural subtext throughout.

**It is an almost universal (if misguided) belief** that one of the universal motifs in *Norma* lies in the protagonist’s dilemma between her **personal passion** and her loyalty and commitment to her people, her homeland and her religion; indeed, some scholars find a parallel in Aida’s dilemmas.[[35]](#endnote-35) While this analogy holds true to a certain extent as far as Adalgisa is concerned,[[36]](#endnote-36) for Norma, according to her explicit testimony **in her first appearance on stage**, **that** dilemma no longer existed. For her, Pollione was **absolutely** supreme: in his love she finds “life, homeland and heaven” (I.4): (“E vita nel tuo seno / e patria e cielo avrò*”*). This is a significantly dialectic statement; the Druid priestess and leader finds in the arch-enemy of her people and homeland a new homeland − *patria.* She is ready to leave everything behind for Pollione, and assume a new national identity − to put it in contemporary terms. Her attitude presents an interesting perspective on the fluidity of identities, yet another theme that is highly relevant in the modern era. Upon learning of Pollione’s sudden recall to Rome, Norma expects her secret lover to take her and their children with him, as she confesses to her confidant, Clotilde (I.7). This absolute love explains the depth of her disappointment and the intensity of her frustration, jealousy, suffering and rage when learning of his betrayal. However, despite her anger, jealousy and aggressive threats, Norma is unable to destroy her children, or Pollione, or Adalgisa. In the end, she is willing to sacrifice herself. In this sense, the pagan chief priestess appears to embrace the spirit of Christianity (and Romanticism), a transformation that can arguably be traced back to Chateaubriand, and which adds yet another dimension to the dialectics of *Norma.*

On the psychological level, in *Norma*, the fury and vindictiveness typical of the classical tradition and paganism (as exemplified by the reactions of Medea and Dido) are counterbalanced and neutralized by love and forgiveness in the spirit of Christianity. This Christian sensibility is reinforced in the ultimate declaration of “Love has triumphed” by the Druid leader, Norma’s father (“*Ha vinto amor”*[II.11]), **harmoniously echoed by the choir which, despite its harsh words against Norma, provides a melodic background supportive of reconciliation between father and daughter — another instance of an intended contrast between music and text.[[37]](#endnote-37)** Remarkably, in the last scene of the opera,a pagan patriarch is made to speak in Christian terms.

The peculiar mixture of paganism, Christianity and Romanticism can be detected in earlier scenes in the opera, especially in Adalgisa’s confession to Norma (**perceived as a religious act)** of her passionate love for Pollione, and Norma’s nostalgic recognition of herself and her own romantic experience throughout that confession (I.8). Another significant example may be found in the descriptions of Adalgisa by Pollione as a “heavenly virgin” (“*vergine celeste”*) or “beloved virgin” (“*vergine adorata”*) (I.5). Thus, Spontini’s Vestal virgin and Chateaubriand’s Christian virgin have coalesced in Romani’s semiotic synthesis.

Moreover, Pollione, the **hedonistic** pagan seducer and **potential abductor**, is finally “converted” to the spirit of Christianity, that permeates his last words, in which death is perceived as a new beginning — the means of reaching a purer, holier (i.e., spiritual) and eternal love:

*Il tuo rogo, o Norma, è il mio!*

*Là più santo incomincia*

*eterno amor!*

Your pyre, O Norma, is mine as well!

There begins a love,

Holier, to last forever!

1. **The Performative Challenge and the Problem of *Regieoper***

This section briefly discusses two examples of relatively recent productions of *Norma* which feature radical interpretations that try to highlight **its** relevance by staging the opera in a modern context. One of them premiered in October 2016 at the Royal Opera House (ROH) in London, under the stage direction of Àlex Ollé (from the Catalan troupe La Fura dels Baus) and his Argentinian assistant Valentina Carrasco, with designs by Alfons Flores. The other production made its debut three years earlier at the Salzburg Festival and was presented on several stages in Western Europe, including the Théâtre des Champs Elysées in Paris and the Edinburgh International Festival.

To use the staging of an opera to convey a message against militarism and religious fundamentalism may be an attractive idea, but in the case of the London production, it comes at the expense of a frequent incompatibility between the libretto, the historical context and the staging. In this production, the Druids have metamorphosed into a clerical and military sect, which, on the religious level, bears unmistakably Spanish-Catholic traits (associated with the Eastern processions or, *mutatis mutandis*, the Inquisition). Their children wear red and black ritual uniforms and high triangular hats reminiscent of the Ku Klux Klan. On the political level, the Druids are presented as a fascist military junta, with Oroveso appearing as a generalissimo. The pagan divinities mentioned in the text are totally incompatible with the suggested Christian context and with a modern background, thereby affecting their plausibility in the production and creating a cultural dissonance. Moreover, the Christian elements in the subtext of the libretto have nothing to do with oppression or fanaticism; on the contrary, as observed above, they are allegorically associated with unconditional love, self-sacrifice, altruism and forgiveness.

Another problem with the interpretation in the ROH production is that these “neo-Druids” in their spectacular forest of crucifixes do not appear to be oppressed by anybody other than themselves and their own religious fanaticism. Indeed, some oppressed groups of people may become fanatics. But who are the equivalent of the Roman oppressor here? Unlike the “neo-Druid” clerical and military uniforms, the modern and elegant suits of Pollione and Flavio, **while consistent with the dialectic concept of the opera through the implied contrast,** do not provide any specific clues as to the transformed **hegemonic identity of their wearers**.[[38]](#endnote-38) Without any clear oppression, rebellion makes no sense. The modernized narrative not only suffers from a dramatic lacuna and lack of coherency, but also loses the opera’s original political message referring to the emergence of nineteenth-century national movements, especially the Italian *Risorgimento*. In a final blow to the original intent of the opera, the stage directors took the liberty of making a shocking change in the finale of this production. In an invented *coup de théâtre*, Oroveso embraces his daughter on her way to the pyre and shoots her in the head — a contrivance incompatible not only with the facts of the libretto, but also with its words and spirit.[[39]](#endnote-39)

The other production, which made its debut at the Salzburg Festival in 2013 under the stage direction of Moshe Leiser and Patrice Caurier, leaves the setting of the plot in France but moves the time period forward by about two thousand years from Roman Gaul to World War II and the Vichy regime. In this version, the Druids have become resistance fighters against the Nazi occupation. Norma, a schoolteacher and major figure in the resistance movement, falls in love with a German officer. The plot takes place in a school where the resistance fighters secretly meet. There is an attempt to adhere to details associated with the new context, and not only in the costumes. For example, before the school goes up in flames, with the two protagonists tied to chairs, Norma’s head is shaved, in line with the historical French practice of humiliating women who collaborated with the Nazis. Unlike Ollé and Carasco in London, Leiser and Caurier at least respect *Norma’*s political motif of conquest, oppression and insurrection, but the incongruity between the pagan divinities mentioned in the text (e.g., the moon goddess, Irminsul, Venus/Venere) and the **modern setting** becomes even more jarring **than on the stage of the ROH,** **given the otherwise clearly realistic character of this production**. S**ome other elements of major significance are also severely affected by the dramaturgic concept of Leiser and Caurier. The clash of civilizations, for example: why should a German officer regard the French as “barbarians?” The tension between femininity and holding a supreme position of power loses much of its potency in the case of a school teacher, however dominant. Norma is deprived not only of her exotic “otherness” but also of her supreme authority and majestic demeanor, a transformative diminution which alters the very essence of this tragedy.**

Both productions encounter a basic problem of most *Regieoper*: rendering a considerable part of the libretto preposterous because of the blatant incompatibility between the original text and the new context imposed by the stage directors in order to convey their own personal messages to the audience. In some cases, such as the English National Opera production of *Rigoletto* under Jonathan Miller’s stage direction,[[40]](#endnote-40) the creative practice of *Regieoper* may achieve satisfactorily coherent results, but *Norma* provides an example of an opera which is hardly translatable and adaptable to a modernized context.

There are significant musicological innovations in the Leiser/ Caurier production. **They are largely due** to Cecilia Bartoli’s efforts to reproduce Bellini's original intentions as faithfully as possible through collaboration with the conductor and musicologist Giovanni Antonini and the La Scintilla Orchestra of Zurich (which plays only on musical instruments belonging to Bellini’s period). Antonini sought to **resuscitate** the ultimate original version of Bellini, including the many revisions the composer made to the manuscript after the hasty premiere.[[41]](#endnote-41) However, the most radical change which purportedly was in keeping with Bellini’s original intention is the reversal of vocal roles: **contrary to the performance tradition** of *Norma*, Bartoli, a mezzo-soprano, undertakes the title role, usually sung by a soprano, while Adalgisa’s role, normally performed by a mezzo-soprano, is performed by a lyric soprano. **Evaluating** **the rationale** b**ehind this musical interpretation and its viability would be beyond the scope o**f **the present** paper.[[42]](#endnote-42) However, there is a fundamental discordance between the claim of trying on the musical level to restore *Norma* to its roots, i.e. the original method of performance**,** and the dramatic methodology of *Regieoper*, which so drastically distances itself from the original concept. Ironically, the *Regieoper* provides an additional dimension, from the field of performing arts, to the complex dialectics of this opera.

**Conclusion**

Close examination reveals that *Norma*’s libretto is actually far more sophisticated than it is usually considered to be.The cultural differences between the background and character of its sources may contribute to explaining the dialectics of this opera **which, on the ideological level, reflect, on the one hand, the tension between paganism and Christianity, and on the other hand, the clash between Neoclassicism and Romanticism in 19th-century culture —** the dispute between “Ancients” and “Moderns.” Bellini’s opera succeeds in building a synthesis between these two almost irreconcilable currents of art and systems of thought. **On the thematic level, the dialectical character of the opera, expressed by a plethora of significant dichotomies and binaries, is amplified throughout by the subtle correlation between** **music and text.** Many of *Norma’*s themes are of particular relevance today**. These include** the clash of civilizations, the problem of religious fanaticism, the balance of power between men and women, the solidarity between women, the tension between femininity and holding a supreme position of power, the fluidity of national, cultural and religious identities, and the relativism of alterity. In many respects, *Norma*’s world, strikingly similar to that of Greek tragedy, with which the opera has many structural affinities, is intensely foreign and yet profoundly familiar to us. Despite recent adaptations to modernized contexts in the spirit of *Regieoper*, it can be argued that this duality of “foreign” and “familiar,” with its vast semantic resonance, can be best understood by seriously delving into the text (and subtext) of the libretto as well as its historical context.

NOTES

1. General summaries of *Norma*’s literary sources exist, e.g., Kimbell (1998), 16–28 and Colas (2015) (the latter is more detailed, though not exhaustive), but the possible interconnection between *Norma*’s sources and its dialectics has never been examined. For a useful survey of the research literature on Norma, see Willier (2009): 75−84**.** Throughout this text, ancient sources are cited using the conventional method used in the research literature that makes text references easily accessible in all academic editions, with no need for further bibliographic data. The opera libretto is quoted by the number of the act, followed by that of the scene. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. There is no specific chronological indication in the libretto. The phrase “the city of the Caesars” (“la città dei cesari”) in I.1 may sound anachronistic for the period of the Roman Republic, but it could be interpreted as referring to the arch-enemy of the Gauls, Julius Caesar, and his fellow Romans, rather than to the later line of emperors starting with Augustus. Caesar served as proconsul in Gaul (Gallia) between 58 and 51 BCE, completed its conquest and suppressed Vercingetorix’s revolt. The late first-century BCE or the early first-century CE is the most plausible chronological setting **as a period in which the Druids had not yet lost hope in the possibility of regaining their freedom**. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. On human sacrifices among the Druid tribes, see Strabo, *Geography*, IV.1.13; Julius Caesar, *The Gallic War* (*De bello gallico*), VI, 16; Cassius Dio, *Roman History*, LXII.7. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. See Ewans (2007): 6, 55–79.  [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. For the similarities between this opera and *Norma*, see André (2006) 158–164. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. **In proto-Celtic “*welet*” means “seer,” and is derived from the verb “*wel*” – “to see**.” See Delamare (2003): 311. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. It should be noted, however, that Aeneas had not abandoned Dido for another woman but intended to leave in order to fulfill his mission of founding **a new city**, Rome. **Virgil’s *Aeneid* (Book IV) also provided the background of the late 17th-century Baroque opera, *Dido and Aeneas* by Henry Purcell.** [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Compare Virgil, *Aeneid*, IV. 305−330; 380−386; 584−629 with *Norma*, I.9; cf. D’Angelo (2014/15), 48–52, with references to further literature in Italian. **Both heroines are extremely eloquent. On Dido’s sophisticated eloquence, see Lovatt (2013).** [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. At times, fire is associated with love: e.g., “burning flame” (“*fiamma ardente*”) in Adalgisa’s s description of her growing passion for Pollione (I.8). [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. **For Sappho’s integration in the literary tradition of abandoned women, see Lipking (1988): 57−96.** [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. See e.g. Esse (2009): 38-39, notes 3 and 4, with references to further evidence, including a quotation from *L’Eco*, February 16, 1829. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. On the inner conflicts of Norma as leader and priestess, lover, mother and daughter, see Isaacson (2012), 1–39, with analysis of **the means by which Bellini's music (especially the orchestral accompaniment) constructed these facets of Norma's personality;** cf. Yohalem (2001). [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. **The psychology of this scene might have influenced** **Eugène Delacroix’s intriguing painting of Medea in a cave on the verge of killing her children, “*Médée furieuse*” (1838, started two years earlier), which depicts a terrified woman torn by intense emotions, looking at once maternally protective and aggressively furious. In this role reversion, it was Norma who inspired the artistic concept of her prototype, Medea, an interesting case for reception studies.** [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. **Significantly juxtaposed by Norma in two imperative lines, imbued with obvious dramatic irony, immediately after the ecstatic “*Casta Diva*:” “Complete the rite, and let the sacred wood/ be clear of the profanes” (“*Fine al rito, e il sacro bosco/ sia disgombro de’ profani*”). Paradoxically, her request is going to be materialized in the finale. Note also the use of the words “*profani*” (I.2) and “*sacrata*” (I.3) by the Druids’ choir.**  [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. **For a general analysis of *Norma*’s musical structure see, e.g., Kimbell (1998): 31−41. For a detailed discussion of its tonality, focused on the *sonorità* (or focal melodic pitch), see Rothstein (2012): 237−279.** [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. **For Bellini’s *canto declamato* and the use of appoggiaturassee, e.g., Esse (2009); Qin (2015), 52–60.**  [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For Norma’s readiness to adopt a new identity by living with Pollione and their children in Rome, **as reflected by her confession to Clotilde, see below**. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. **Even when Norma states that her anger is greater than that of her former lover (“*il mio furore passa il tuo*”), the melody still exhibits self-control and intimacy rather than vindictiveness.**  [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. **For the importance of gesture and other channels of nonverbal communication, including some vocal effects (such as sighs or sobs) in Bellini’s opera, see Smart (2004), 69–100, with a focus on the “language of pain.”** [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. **This tirade is reminiscent of Dido’s vindictive anger in Virgil’s *Aeneid,* IV. 604–606, against Aeneas’ entire tribe, which she desires to see annihilated in flames**. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. **This complements a former confrontation between the protagonists, which occurred in the finale of Act I, in Adalgisa's presence.** [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Durkheim (1930), 264–331 makes the distinction between three suicidal patterns: the egoistic, the altruistic and the anomic. Notably, in Soumet’s play, Norma commits suicide by jumping off a cliff, **like Sappho in the tradition mentioned above**. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. For the role of the chorus in Greek tragedy, see Gagné and Govers-Hopman (2013) and their copious bibliography. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. For Pollione’s dream, see *Norma*, I.2. For a psychoanalytic approach to dreams in Greek tragedy, see Devereux (1976). [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. For an innovative approach to catharsis and other Aristotelian concepts of tragedy from the perspective of neuroscience, see Meineck (2018): 195–211. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Schopenhauer (2008/1859): vol. II, 137. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. See, e.g., Kibédi-Varga (1990); Guerlac (2007): 401−406. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. For elements typical of Romanticism in *Norma*, cf. Erasmi (1988/89), who compares the love triangle of this opera with that of Aida/ Radames/ Amneris in Verdi’s *Aida*. However, the place of this trio in the socio-political power system was quite different from that of Norma/ Pollione/ Adalgisa. For Romanticism in Italy and its French sources of inspiration, see especially Gorofalo (2005), 238–255. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. See Esse (2009): 37−39. For the rise of romantic opera see Dent (1976)**.** [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. See, e.g., Kimbell (1998), 126–130. Later in the 19th century creating piano variations on operatic themes became common practice, irrespective of subject matter. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. As Bellini wrote in a letter to one of his friends, quoted by Weinstock (1972), 94. For the Ernani project, see also Vardino (2007): 64−68. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. One may recall the appeal of populist politicians in France to the Gallic roots of the nation in their attempt to protect national identity from outsiders. For example, former French President Nicholas Sarkozy recently claimed that, as citizens, all immigrants should see the Gallic natives as their ancestors. [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See Smith (1997): 94–100, with references to gender studies, especially the semiotic impact of McClary (1991). Smith refers to the “latently erotic female homosociality so often associated with the convent” (97). [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. The action of this play takes place in a concentration camp and is focused on a love triangle: the connection between two Italian-Jewish women (an actress and a singer) and a German officer who happens to be a passionate admirer of Bellini’s *Norma*. See Streifer (2013). For tragedy and feminism in general, see Wohl (2005), 145–160. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. See, e.g., Arblaster (1992), 82; Smith (1997), 93–94. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. Initially, Adalgisa is torn between her religious duties and her love, but she follows Norma’s path in coping with the dilemma. In her case too, the emotion of love overcomes religious and patriotic commitment. She is also ready to leave everything behind and assume a new identity. Adalgisa is, in fact, a young replica or an *alter ego* of Norma, as evidenced most clearly by Norma’s reactions to her confession of having fallen in love **(e.g. “Oh, memories!” – “*Oh! Rimembranza*”)** **as well as by the melodic identity of recurrent lines in their duet** (I.8).See, e.g., Lally (2006): 36−37; Isaacson (2012): 19. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. H**owever, this “anomaly” does not reverberate in the *fortissimo* climax in the realistic finale, where the choir is definitely antagonistic to Norma.** [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. **The idea of giving** a palpably modern and secular outlook to Norma’s flat, presumably meant to stress her split personality and secret integration (or acculturation) into Pollione’s world, i**s pushed to inadequate extremes** through eccentric gimmicks that are likely to create a ludicrous effect totally foreign to the spirit of this lyric tragedy (e.g., the sight of the children watching television). [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. **In the libretto, Oroveso, now a broken man in tears, states that a father is allowed to weep** (“*O, pianto, sei permesso a un genitor*”). **Note also Pollione’s words, “Let us die together” (“*Moriamo insieme”*).**  [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Jonathan Miller successfully transfers *Rigoletto*’s plot from 16th-century Mantua to the Mafia world of Little Italy in the New York City of the 1950s. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. The conductor used a new critical edition by Maurizio Biondi and Riccardo Minasi (2013), based on Bellini’s autograph score – Kassel: Bärenreiter Verlag (a complete studio recording is available on CD, Decca 4786018, 2013). [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. It is, however, in place to maintain that Giuditta Pasta, the first performer of Norma, was not a regular mezzo-soprano or soprano. She had an “absolute voice” (*voce assoluta*) – a term that in the operatic lexicon refers to a rare ability of singing with equal flexibility, self-control and ornamentation both lyrical and dramatic roles (a similar term is *soprano sfogato*); see, e.g., Riggs (2003); Rutherford (2007). **Pasta’s contemporary and great rival, Maria Malibran and, later, Maria Callas, too, shared this rare quality, as they also possessed the royal demeanor and charisma that are essential for performing Norma’s role;** cf. Qin (2015): 26−84.

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    [↑](#endnote-ref-42)